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Provisional

4912th meeting

Wednesday, 18 February 2004, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Wang Guangya	(China)
Members:	Algeria	Mr. Baali
	Angola	Mr. Gaspar Martins
	Benin	Mr. Zinsou
	Brazil	Mr. Sardenberg
	Chile	Mr. Muñoz
	France	Mr. De La Sablière
	Germany	Mr. Pleuger
	Pakistan	Mr. Khalid
	Philippines	Mr. Baja
	Romania	Mr. Motoc
	Russian Federation	Mr. Lavrov
	Spain	Ms. Menéndez
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Thomson
	United States of America	Mr. Negroponte

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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04-24222 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, and in the absence of objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Terje Roed-Larsen, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. Roed-Larsen to take a seat at the Council table.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Terje Roed-Larsen, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

I now give him the floor.

Mr. Roed-Larsen: When I last briefed the Council in December, I struck a cautiously optimistic tone, citing the opening of a narrow window of opportunity for resuming the peace process. This window of opportunity — based primarily on the stated willingness of both sides to talk to each other — still remains open. In recent weeks, key Israeli and Palestinian officials have met. We hope that a first meeting between the two Prime Ministers, Mr. Qurei and Mr. Sharon, will come at the earliest opportunity.

If they do indeed meet, as we expect, we might see the preparation for bold actions we have long called for — actions that could allow us finally to move down the path to peace as envisioned in the Quartet's road map and endorsed in Security Council resolution 1515 (2003).

Already, Mr. Sharon has announced preparations for one bold step which could re-establish the requisite trust between the two parties to fulfil all their requirements under the road map. Earlier this month, he announced that he would withdraw the Israeli military and settlements from the Gaza Strip, where they control about 40 per cent of the land. No Israeli prime minister has previously had the boldness and the vision to say he will remove settlers — as long called for by the international community — and initiate a plan for its implementation. The proposed step — withdrawal from occupied territory — should be welcomed by all.

Prime Minister Qurei did so recently after meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, saying he would accept it as a first step of a broader withdrawal. Further statements of support have been made by our Quartet colleagues and other Member States engaged in the attempt to forge peace in the region. But, as the Secretary-General said after Mr. Sharon's announcement, the withdrawal from Gaza must be seen as a first step. It must be made in the context of the road map and as part of a cooperative engagement between Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the international community. We anticipate hearing more fully, and in operational terms, about Mr. Sharon's plan soon.

The announcement has set the stage for three possible scenarios in the coming months. One is the resumption of a vigorous peace process, with re-engagement between Israel and many of its Arab partners. The second is unilateral Israeli disengagement from parts of the occupied Palestinian territory, starting in Gaza, but not as part of a process or re-engagement. The third centres on the inability of the parties to enact that withdrawal, which would maintain the status quo, with all the violence and misery that goes with it. That could lead to the rapid erosion of the Palestinian Authority and, with it, growing disorder, chaos and possibly even gang rule in the occupied Palestinian territory. Such a scenario would be deeply against Palestinian and Israeli interests and could be a destabilizing element in the region.

The only viable long-term option for both parties is the first — the resumption of the peace process. If both parties engage in good faith and are guided by the international community under the auspices of the Quartet, real progress can be made. The alternatives could lead to dramatic and negative consequences.

Still, much has been made of the possible unilateral nature of this move. It is unlikely that, in

practice, an orderly withdrawal of thousands of settlers from the Gaza Strip could take place without cooperation from the Palestinian Authority and the assistance of the international community. Without such cooperation and assistance, a withdrawal could easily strengthen the most radical elements, weaken the Palestinian Authority further and lead eventually to more violence.

In that sense, the term "unilateral withdrawal" is not particularly meaningful, because such a withdrawal cannot take place in vacuum. In practice, a withdrawal must be negotiated between the two sides or through a third party. That was the case of the so-called unilateral withdrawal by Israel from southern Lebanon, which in fact was negotiated by the United Nations under the auspices of the Security Council.

Such cooperation and assistance should readily be given. As long as the removal of settlers in the Gaza Strip is a true withdrawal, it should be supported as a bold confidence-building act and a first step to the fulfilment of the United Nations calls to the Government of Israel to end its occupation, as set forth in Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

This cautiously positive view of the situation is tempered by the grim reality that confronts both Palestinians and Israelis. We remain in a stalemate characterized by continued violence and lack of constructive progress on the road map, with Israeli occupation still firmly entrenched and little concrete Palestinian movement on reform.

Sadly, the Gaza withdrawal announcement occurred in the context of a recent upsurge in violence that has led to more bloodshed, loss of life and misery. Since the last briefing on 16 January, at total of 11 Israelis and 65 Palestinians, including at least eight under age, have died. At least 305 Palestinians and 58 Israelis have been injured. That brings the death toll since September 2000 to 925 Israelis and 3,165 Palestinians.

Much of the recent Israel military action has been concentrated in the Gaza Strip. Many of the Palestinian deaths came during two raids — one in January and one last week. A total of 24 Palestinians were killed during the exchange of fire in those raids. In addition, a series of Israeli military incursions in the area of Rafah next to the Egyptian border has left nearly 600 people homeless through house demolitions. In all, nearly 10,000 people have lost their homes since October 2000.

The tragic outcome of those events underscores the importance of the parties' taking immediate steps to return to the negotiating table in order to end such violence. We call on the Government of Israel to fulfil its responsibilities under international law to protect civilians. We call upon the Palestinian Authority to fully ensure that only authorized individuals within defined security forces have access to and are allowed to have weapons, in keeping with that entity's law.

I regret to report that, during the current reporting period, the relative reduction of terrorist attacks was shattered on 29 January by a suicide bombing in Jerusalem that killed 11 and injured at least 50. We must reiterate our utter condemnation of terrorism. No cause can justify such heinous crimes. We urge the Palestinian Authority to take the steps necessary to bring those who plan, facilitate and carry out such attacks to justice.

In the context of this continuing violence and terror, we applaud the Government of Egypt for its continuing and tireless efforts to secure a ceasefire by working with the Palestinian Authority and a variety of Palestinian groups and with Israel. Although no agreement has been reached as yet, efforts continue — ones that, we hope, will soon lead to a full and lasting ceasefire between Israelis and Palestinians.

The conflict exacts a toll on the lives of the people of the region in ways other than violence. The humanitarian situation remains dire in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Continued closures and Israeli military operations hinder Palestinian economic and social activity and cause the Palestinian people to endure daily humiliations. The economic situation is still very poor, with high unemployment and widespread poverty.

However, according to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Palestinian Ministry of Finance, the West Bank economy stabilized in 2003. That is attributed in part to an easing of the most severe measures of closure — notably curfew — combined with the Palestinian population's developing new coping mechanisms. According to those institutions, the West Bank economy grew by 4.5 per cent last year, with a concurrent gain in employment.

While that may seem promising, we must caution that it comes in the context of an economy that had already seriously contracted. In addition, it roughly matches the population growth rate, meaning that per capita income remains constant. However, the

stabilization of the economy underscores that, if closure were eased as part of a peace process, the Palestinian economy could start to recover.

Even with some signs of economic stabilization, the more than $1 billion that donors provide annually must still be used primarily for budgetary support and humanitarian relief. The frustration among donors over the diversion of development aid to humanitarian needs, coupled with the almost daily obstructions that Israeli security measures cause to the delivery of humanitarian assistance, is causing some donors to diminish or curtail their funding programmes.

This attrition of funds to the Palestinian Authority has left it on the verge of bankruptcy — a potentially catastrophic situation, because Palestinian Authority salaries are one of the few means of support for Palestinian families. The insolvency and the resulting chaos that would follow such a collapse would make resolution of the conflict infinitely more difficult and would strengthen the hand of those who would use violence to advance their aims. Only a lifting of the policy of closures, coupled with a continued commitment from donors, will assist the reconstruction and development of the Palestinian economy. However, that development can be put on a sound footing only if the Palestinian Authority continues to make strides in reforming the way it conducts its business and provides space for civil society to flourish.

The area of security is particularly vital. Last week, the Palestinian Authority Cabinet approved a decision to channel Palestinian security personnel salaries directly into bank deposits, which will help make the payment system regulated and transparent. It is of the utmost importance that that decision be implemented without delay. Also, there are continued efforts to overcome the obstacles to unifying the disparate Palestinian Authority security services into one framework under the authority of the Prime Minister. We should all support that goal, towards which Mr. Qurei has been working so assiduously.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) continues to face financial difficulties. An increase in calls on UNRWA's resources because of the humanitarian situation, coupled with a lessening of support for the Agency, has brought about a financial crisis that will lead to less support being provided to Palestinian refugees. UNRWA has received less than half of the $196 million that it requested last year to feed some 1.1 million Palestinians, to rebuild destroyed shelters, to create jobs and to provide emergency health services, including counselling for traumatized children. A population of more than 1.5 million refugees relies on those emergency services. UNRWA has now launched a new appeal for $193 million to cover 2004, and we hope the international community will respond generously in view of the urgent needs on the ground. I would like to take this opportunity to remind the Security Council that the United Nations, through UNRWA, runs the bulk of essential social services in the Gaza Strip.

The continued construction of the barrier on Palestinian land, including around Jerusalem, casts a pall over the positive developments I mentioned earlier. As the Secretary-General stated in his report to the General Assembly last November:

> "In the midst of the road map process, when each party should be making good-faith confidence-building measures, the barrier's construction in the West Bank cannot, in this regard, be seen as anything but a deeply counterproductive act". (*A/ES-10/248, para. 29*)

That litany of negatives, coupled with Mr. Sharon's positive announcement on the Gaza Strip withdrawal, highlights the importance of restarting the peace process through the Quartet's road map. We must ensure that its revival does not suffer the fate of the first attempt to implement the road map. Last June, the essential principle of parallelism was abandoned, and a succession of small steps stalled almost immediately.

However, now the parties must take advantage of the opportunity provided by a potential resumption of the peace process based on the Gaza withdrawal initiative. The leaders of both peoples must recommit themselves to peace and must begin to work to fulfil their obligations under the road map. They must understand that there is no alternative plan on the horizon that will relieve them of the responsibility to take difficult and necessary steps.

At the same time, the Quartet must re-engage with the parties and must revitalize its efforts. The parties have shown that they cannot bring about peace on their own. There is too little trust between them to work together effectively without international help. But they need not act on their own. The road map

provides them with a guide to peace backed by a united international community represented by the Quartet.

During this period, the Government of Israel and Hizbullah agreed, through German mediation, to an important prisoner exchange. We congratulate the Federal Republic of Germany on its tireless efforts to broker this humanitarian understanding.

In the last briefing to the Security Council (see S/PV.4895), we noted with great concern the discovery of explosive devices that had again been planted by Hizbullah on the Israeli side of the Blue Line. This development is a blatant violation of Security Council resolutions and poses a risk to lives. It can potentially destabilize the area.

We urge all parties to refrain from any action that could lead to destabilization and call on the Government of Lebanon to establish full control over south Lebanon in order to ensure that international peace and security may prevail. Hizbullah's attack on 19 January on an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) bulldozer attempting to remove one of these devices was a very regrettable and unwarranted escalation, which killed one soldier and injured another. The subsequent IDF air attack on Hizbullah positions in south Lebanon, in which no one was injured, was also regrettable.

Since the last briefing to the Security Council and despite numerous calls for their cessation, Israeli overflights of Lebanese territory have continued. During the reporting period, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) recorded Israeli air violations on at least six different days and anti-aircraft fire by Hizbullah on at least two occasions. One violation does not justify another, but I would like to stress the difference between an overflight and actions that pose obvious mortal risk.

The absence of the requisite governing authority in south Lebanon allows groups that do not share the Government of Lebanon's desire for peace to take actions that jeopardize security throughout the region. I want again to vigorously reiterate both the Secretary-General's and the Security Council's call for the Government of Lebanon to exercise its authority everywhere in southern Lebanon through the activities of the Joint Security Forces and the Lebanese army. I would like to repeat here the Secretary-General's words in his report to the Council last month on UNIFIL: "I urge the Government [of Lebanon] to exert control over the use of force on its entire territory and to prevent all attacks across the Blue Line" (*S/2004/50, para. 28*).

Meanwhile, UNIFIL will continue to contribute to the restoration of peace and security by observing, monitoring and reporting on developments in its area of operation.

I would like to take this opportunity to underline the consistently outstanding and courageous work performed by the officers and soldiers of UNIFIL. In difficult and often dangerous circumstances, they serve the cause of peace with distinction. Under the determined leadership of Major General Lalit Tewari during the past two and a half years, they have risen to every challenge. Last Saturday, General Tewari passed command of UNIFIL over to Major General Alain Pellegrini. I thank General Tewari, a fine officer who upheld the best traditions of the United Nations in working tirelessly to achieve peace.

The situation in the Golan has remained calm since our last report and serves to exemplify how, ultimately, all parties can exercise restraint and work through diplomatic channels to resolve their differences. President Assad's recent overture to resume peace negotiations with Israel is encouraging. We believe that it would be in the interest of peace for Israel to respond positively to this outstretched hand. I truly hope that both parties seize this opportunity to forge a peace agreement, based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 1515 (2003).

The parties have another chance for peace. The international community has another opportunity to make the road map process work. It behoves us to do everything within our power to make something of these chances. We have repeatedly called in this forum and elsewhere for the parties to take bold steps to build confidence and jump-start the peace process. An Israeli withdrawal from Gaza has the earmarks of such a step. We anxiously await the details and timetable for the withdrawal and urge the Palestinians to meet the plan with meaningful reciprocal confidence-building measures, most imperatively in the area of security.

These actions must be taken with care, but also with some haste. The humanitarian situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip should not be allowed to deteriorate any further. The people of both sides deserve to be free of violence, terror, fear and harassment. Without delay or preconditions, and in keeping with the road map, their leaders should guide

them, with the help of the international community, to a just, lasting and comprehensive peace based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003).

As we enter what could be a dynamic yet potentially confusing time, I wish to remind members of the Council, as they analyse events and statements, of what Cicero once said in a letter to a friend:

> "Unchanging consistency of standpoint has never been considered a virtue in great statesmen. At sea it is good sailing to run before the gale even if the ship cannot make harbour; but if she can make harbour by changing tack, only a fool would risk shipwreck by holding to the original course rather than change it and still reach his destination. Similarly, while all of us as statesmen should set before our eyes the goal of peace with honour ... it is our aim, not our language, which must be always the same."

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Mr. Roed-Larsen for his comprehensive briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I should now like to invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting was adjourned at 10.40 a.m.